

earth, an essential grace that comes from the feeling of belonging. (The danger, of course, is that wealthier people often take up too much space. They do not see the others crushed under their wide flinging steps.) Where the poorer person's danger is the self-consciousness that shrinks us into invisibility, the wealthier one's is the unconscious arrogance that inflates.

But what happens when one feels self-conscious and small and is seen as large, wealthy, powerful, controlling? At a young age, I knew the anti-Semitic portrait of the wealthy, exploitative Jew. I also knew that I did not feel powerful or controlling. My parents and I felt powerless, fearful, vulnerable. We owned nothing. All my parents saved, after working 50 years, would not equal the cost of 1 year of college today. What does it mean to have others' definition of one's reality so vastly different from one's experience of it? The effects are confusion, anger, entrapment. I lost touch with what was real, what my own experiences really were.

As a political person I felt particularly vulnerable to the hated image of "the Jew." I knew it was a stereotype and not my experience or the experience of the Jews I grew up with—but it still made me feel guilt, not pride, for any success I did have, for any rise in status. If the stereotype said "Jews have everything," the only way I could avoid that stereotype would be to have nothing. If you are poor, you are not a Jew. If you are successful, you are a bad Jew. The trap.

The economic and professional success of many second-generation Jews became tinged for me, as if we had done something wrong. To feel bad about achievement, to hold back one's power, is very destructive. My aunts and uncles, my parents, my friends' parents all had little education and little money. Yet we—my cousins, my sister, my friends—not only went to college, but even graduated school and law school. I was speaking the other day with my aunt, who was saying what a miracle it was that her four children were all professionals and she was poor and uneducated. But the miracle was not really a miracle at all. It was the result of parents who saw education as very, very important—as a way out of the entrapment of class and prejudice.

It was the result of parents who worked desperately hard so that their children could have that way out. It was a City College system in New York City that provided completely free education while we worked and lived at home.

In one generation we created an incredible economic, class, professional, and educational distance between ourselves and our parents. The danger of this success is that we forget the material soil that nourished us, the hard work that propped us up; that we lose our consciousness of the harm and evil of condescension, exploitation, oppression, the pain of being made to feel inferior and invisible. Anzia Yezierska, a Jewish immigrant writer, says "Education without a heart is a curse." But to keep that consciousness and that heart and to be able to step onto the dance floor of life and say "I am here," reflecting back to our parents the beauty and strength we inherited from them, that would be a very real "miracle" indeed.

[1987]

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### *Poverty, Hopelessness, and Hope*

KENDALL A. JOHNSON

I know that I'm one of the lucky ones. I have a law school education, my ticket into the professional middle class. It's been almost a lifetime since those days of picking fruit and vegetables in the deep south, or freezing without heat or running water in a trailer in upstate New York. It sounds like an American dream, and surely it is, but the odds are against most poor people and they don't make it out. Although I'm truly grateful that I was one of those who did, it saddens me to know that in a wealthy country like ours, most poor people will remain in poverty regardless of their personal efforts to rise above it.

During my early childhood things seemed hopeless. The daily struggles to survive took priority over everything else. In my family working in the fields

for money to eat was more important than going to school. Baby-sitting for the little ones so the older ones could work also took priority over school. By the time I realized the importance of education, the immediate struggle to survive was pulling me in the opposite direction. I'm sure that many poor children face this dilemma. Unfortunately, most of them succumb to the pressure and drop out.

Some of the most damning social messages received by poor children are during early childhood education. For me, elementary school was a humiliating experience. I remember feeling inferior, stupid, dirty, ugly, and hated. In the early years we often found ourselves homeless, so we were always moving around and I attended several different schools in a short time. Being a new kid was bad enough, but being poor and dirty made us additional targets for ridicule by teachers, school administrators, and students alike. To further aggravate the situation, we were absent a lot, which made it almost impossible to keep up with grade level.

Under these circumstances, it was hard to feel positive about school. My self-esteem was constantly under attack. I always felt self-conscious and I was aware of the differences between my family and the others who were better off. Furthermore, my mother and older siblings believed that everybody and everything was against us. At the time it was easy to understand why they thought that way. I used to think that the easiest way to cope with the humiliation and maintain some dignity was to fight with the other kids who picked on us. At the time, I believed that if I were tough and fought back, then I could be proud of myself. It seemed easier and it hurt a lot less than quietly swallowing my shame. This of course led to disciplinary problems with the schools, and it wasn't long before I learned that fighting only made things worse. Most of my brothers and sisters never learned this lesson and continued to get in trouble for fighting in school. I think this is partially why so many boys from poor families are labeled as behavior problems and placed in smaller special education classrooms where school administrators feel they can be more easily controlled.

Girls from poor families are less likely to be tracked in this manner because they are less likely to

fight back, but the devastation to their self-esteem is notable. Girls in this situation often try to disappear. They sit in the back of the classroom praying that they won't be called on or even noticed. They skip school on days they have gym class so they won't be embarrassed because they don't have appropriate gym clothes or clean socks and underwear. They avoid participating in school activities and seek out a small group of other girls to hang around with from similar backgrounds. I did this for awhile myself. Most of these girls, if they don't drop out of school to have babies, are tracked into vocational studies such as home economics, cosmetology, and noncollege bound mathematics and health sciences.

For me high school was very different. I was the only poor kid in my class taking chemistry, trigonometry, and physics, along with the other college bound courses. Although I was very isolated, I understood how poor children were tracked and I took extreme measures to ensure that I wouldn't be. As soon as I was old enough, I worked after school in the packinghouses packing the fruit and vegetables, instead of picking them during school hours. I fought with my mother to let me go to school, rather than baby-sit. I sought out supportive teachers to mentor me and I always carried my schoolbooks home so if I missed school for a few days I could keep up.

I remember thinking, I'm only a kid and I still have a chance. I'm going to be different. If I stay in school and study hard maybe I can go to college. If I go to college, I won't have to stay poor for the rest of my life. This underlying belief fueled my desire for education as a means to escape the poverty. From the time I was 13 years old through my college career, I would recite this line of reasoning to myself. It kept me focused and gave me the inspiration to remain disciplined. I learned to draw strength from struggle. I was determined to walk the moral high ground. I believed that struggle made one a better person than if things came easy. I told myself this as a source of inspiration during hard times. It got to the point where I believed it, which helped me make it through. Ultimately, my strategies worked and law school was the icing on the cake.

By the time I actually made it to college, I felt a lot of guilt associated with leaving my family behind to pursue my own career. One of the hardest things to watch was the hopes and dreams of my siblings and friends turn to defeat and despair, while my own future looked brighter and brighter with each year of college or law school completed. When I'd go home, all I heard about was everyone's problems and how lucky I was to have gotten out.

At the time I was still broke, living on student loans and part-time waitress jobs, while keeping my eye on the prize. But my family didn't see it that way. I was already well off in their eyes. I had made it. The goal that I was trying to achieve was within my grasp and they saw no distinction between working toward it and having already achieved it. I often thought that they credited my success to luck, as though I personally had little to do with it. I felt like they thought that somehow I was bestowed with the power to change things for all of us, but refused to do so for them. This exacerbated their growing resentment toward me and my feelings of guilt. I knew on some level that regardless of my personal struggles, I was luckier. My future was full of promise, while theirs was not. I felt guilty that I couldn't save them and they didn't understand that I was still struggling to save myself.

Furthermore, by that time most of my daily life was spent with educated middle-class people and I was becoming exposed to different values and belief systems. The cultural divide widened and pretty soon it got harder and harder to find things in common with most of my siblings and former community. Before long, the day-to-day things that we had in common were reduced to memories. This too became a source of guilt. I wanted to romanticize the struggle and some of the values prevalent among poor people in an effort to hang on to my roots and to maintain a connection with those from whom I came.

I wanted to be proud of my accomplishments and I wanted my family to be proud of me as well. But I knew that on several levels they resented me. On the one hand they are proud of my accomplishments, but on the other hand they resented me for what they perceived was my acquisition of middle-class

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values that they found so repressive. It was as though I had become the enemy, the oppressor. I think they thought that I blamed them for being poor. It was like I had become one of those school administrators of my childhood who looked down on us as though we were trash that would never amount to anything.

Moreover, this new value system that I had learned at college was inconsistent with theirs. They had this "us versus them" mentality and I no longer did. Furthermore, in their eyes I had become one of "them." I had become someone to fear. Like the school administrator, I too had the power to have their children taken away. The ignorance, the violence, and the other dysfunctional behaviors were all things that I had openly rejected and they saw my rejection of these things as a rejection of them. In their view, I denied their struggle and thought that I was better than they were.

The truth is, I rejected the ignorance, the violence, and the despair, but I don't reject the people or their struggle. I know that poor people's hardships are genuine and that most people can't overcome them. I'm a realist and I see the real-life obstacles that stand in their way. But I also understand that if you give up and stop trying, you will never succeed.

The prejudice against poor people by the larger society creates additional barriers, which perpetuate poverty. Poor people live such miserable stressed-out lives that they become depressed after struggling for a better life to no avail. They are routinely abused by welfare workers when applying for assistance, which negatively affects their self-esteem, causing undue anxiety, frustration, and even major depression. Negotiating the welfare system is a difficult and humiliating experience, and anyone who has done it will tell you the same. The system is designed to discourage and disqualify people from receiving benefits, rather than helping them. Emotionally abusing applicants and recipients is the most obvious tactic used in this endeavor. Baseless denials and cutoffs of benefits are another. Poor people often go without basic essentials for months at a time while waiting for benefits to be issued or restored. Their bills go unpaid and many of them experience

eviction from their housing, even though they have complied with every request that the welfare agency has asked of them.

The working poor are exploited by employers and often have the limited choices of working for unlivable wages without medical benefits or pension plans, or bowing their heads in shame and enduring the abuse of the welfare system in order to get the assistance they need. Most people receiving public assistance work and make so little money on their jobs that they need additional assistance in order to survive.

Most poor people are women and children. And as we already know working women earn significantly less money than men. They are also significantly less likely to abandon their children. As a result, they are left with the sole physical and financial responsibilities for their children, on about two-thirds of a man's paycheck. Although state welfare plans provide child-support collection departments, the onus of locating the fathers and their resources is generally placed on the shoulders of the women, who are often denied benefits by welfare agencies for not having the relevant information.

After being defeated at every turn, depression and despair are inevitable. Hope turns to hopelessness, which is often misinterpreted as laziness. The more sympathetic middle-class experts refer to this hopelessness as learned helplessness, as though it were phenomena endemic to the poor. I think that it is a perfectly normal response to the circumstances that poor people face. Although it's not a particularly healthy one, neither are the circumstances.

Over the years I have learned that I cannot control what my family thinks. But my guilt for having left them behind has never completely subsided. As time has passed it has gotten easier since many of my family elders have passed away. But it's still painful to witness my siblings aging so quickly, and to watch their children as defeated by poverty as they were.

I guess that part of my sadness stems from the fact that I know that most poor people are not responsible for their poverty and that contrary to common beliefs, they personally have little power to change their situation. In a capitalist system like ours, poverty is inevitable regardless of how rich

the country is. Corporate America benefits from the fact that there are no Federal laws guaranteeing workers a livable and fair wage that corresponds with inflation and cost of living. Under this system, it is no surprise that it is those already burdened with sexism and/or racism who are most likely to fall to the bottom of the economic scale.

I make it a point to remind myself of how lucky I am. And I believe that those of us who become educated and escape the traps of poverty have a responsibility to those less fortunate. This sense of duty was ingrained in me, and it is one of those values that I learned from my family that I choose to keep. My family always expected my help, and I felt a responsibility to provide it. Unfortunately, I was unable to cure the ills causing their poverty, and I don't think that I will ever completely get over it.

I cope with my guilt in part by dedicating my professional career to providing legal services to the poor. For the past ten years I have fought in the civil courts to provide affordable housing for poor women and children in New York City. Unfortunately, I often feel like my services are accomplishing little more than putting a band-aid on a hemorrhage. Even so, I take solace in the fact that each time I save a poor family from eviction, I make a difference in their individual lives.

[2002]

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### *Grace Paley Reading*

TOI DERRICOTTE

Finally, the audience gets  
restless, & they send me  
to hunt for Grace. I find her  
backing out of the bathroom, bending  
over, wiping up her footprints  
as she goes with a little  
sheet of toilet paper, explaining,  
"In some places, after the lady mops, the bosses  
come to check on her.  
I just don't want them to think  
she didn't do her job."

[1997]